

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
National Foreign Assessment Center  
April 6, 1978

THE SOVIETS AND AFRICA

PART I: PRESENT SOVIET ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS

1. The Soviets today see themselves riding a wave of favorable circumstances in Africa which is gradually expanding their influence and their range of future options at the expense of the West. They are well aware of the great uncertainties and difficulties that still face them, but are probably even more impressed with how far they have recently advanced from a much weaker initial position. They appear to have a sense of having turned a corner in the last three years. Having now established a strong presence in two major centers of former Western influence, they seem determined to do their best to build on this, to persevere in exploitation of what they regard as a significant breakthrough.

2. Since 1975, in the wake of the simultaneous disappearance of the Portuguese and Haile Selassie, the Soviets have for the first time found it possible to intervene in black Africa on a large scale, first in Angola and now in Ethiopia, to secure victories for ideologically congenial forces, and to obtain what they hope will be an enduring presence for themselves. Each of these interventions set a new precedent -- in the increasing scope of the Soviet logistical effort, in the quantity of Soviet military hardware deployed, in the size of the Cuban combat forces used as proxies, and in the severity of the political constraints hindering any Western response. There is little doubt that this cumulative experience has greatly strengthened Soviet self-confidence and long-range expectation. The Soviets do not conclude from this experience that other arenas in Africa will necessarily offer them similar scope for the display of great power muscle. They probably believe, however, that they have now established their role as a permanent actor in Africa much more firmly than before and that they have vividly advertised their capabilities and the alternative they offer in a manner that will pay dividends for years to come.

3. In looking for ways to expand on these achievements, the Soviets probably consider their most valuable discovery of the past three years to have been the political advantages of the extensive use of Cuban proxies. The Soviets have found that deployment of the Cubans evokes considerably less African resentment and much less risk of drastic Western reaction than would the use of comparable Soviet forces. At the same time, the

25X1

introduction of Cuban combat forces, assisted by appropriate Soviet leadership and weaponry, has greatly extended Soviet geopolitical reach. In Africa as a whole, Cuba's revolutionary credentials and status as a small state claiming membership in the nonaligned movement gives the Cubans broader access and acceptability than the Soviets, while paving the way for Soviet influence.

4. At the focal points of the black nationalist struggle, the demonstrated availability of the combination of Cuban manpower and Soviet hardware increases the political weight of Soviet-favored contenders and alternatives, and generates continual pressure on insurgent leaders and Front Line states to accept a greater Cuban/Soviet presence. The Soviets thus have reason to value highly this promising partnership in Africa with Castro, and probably see it as dependent upon a mutuality of interest.

5. Castro's behavior in Africa, in turn, appears motivated partly by a genuine ideological fervor for "socialist" and "anti-imperialist" causes and partly by ambition to expand his own role on the world scene, and the Soviets apparently believe these interests will probably continue to run in fundamental harmony with their own.

6. For their part, the Soviets are motivated at the most fundamental level by a political-ideological felt need to do whatever can be prudently done to encourage the ejection and replacement of Western influence from an area -- Africa -- which they regard as having until recently been totally dominated by Western imperialism and "neo-colonialism." Successful Soviet efforts to produce such subtractions from "imperialist" strength tend to revive their own view of themselves, weakened by negative trends elsewhere, as upholders of a preordained, long-term historical process in which power and influence around the world is gradually shifting from the West and toward themselves. To the degree that they can interpret trends abroad in this light, this also helps to legitimize their own rule in the Soviet Union as an essential part of the world process.

7. Superimposed on this underlying motive are powerful geopolitical and strategic concerns: the desire to assert and compel recognition of the USSR as an effective great-power actor with global reach, and the desire to secure bases and support facilities for the expansion of Soviet distant naval and air operations. These strategic considerations appear to have played some role in the Soviet decisions to seize the opportunities presented in Angola and Ethiopia, on the west and east coasts of the continent. In the Ethiopian case, this strategic motive was fortified by the Soviet wish to respond to the Somali expulsion of the Soviet Union from its base at Berbera. Finally, the Soviet geopolitical reasons to act in Ethiopia were reinforced both by the desire to consolidate a position in the largest East African state and by the wish to respond to US actions in recent years perceived as intended to constrict Soviet influence in the Middle East.

8. Inland from the two coasts, in southern Africa, strategic concerns and the desire for military facilities appear to be somewhat less important in the mix of Soviet motives, and the more fundamental political-ideological urge to weaken Western influence seems relatively more important. The Soviets foresee a sequence of long-term struggles for power by black liberation movements -- in Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa, in that order -- which they expect to place the West increasingly on the defensive politically and which they hope can be used to enlarge the role of the Cubans and themselves. Of primary immediate concern to the Soviets is their conviction that they have a stake in the defeat of any Zimbabwe settlement that does not give an important share of power to Nkomo. In the meantime, they also hope that the pressures of the Zimbabwe issue will gradually bring about a shift in the balance of power in Zambia in their favor.

9. At the same time, the Soviets evidently also have some hopes eventually to expand their influence to areas contiguous to their new geopolitical base in Ethiopia. They have approached the Somalis, thus far unsuccessfully, to urge them to renew their relationship with Moscow. They have also extended initial feelers to the Kenyans through Ethiopian intermediaries, raising the issue of improved Kenyan relations with the Soviet Union which they hope may become more pertinent after Kenyatta's death. It is also possible that the Soviets may eventually wish to cooperate with any Ethiopian efforts made to expand their influence in Djibouti.

10. While exploring such possibilities, the Soviets continue to be aware of the many remaining weak aspects of their position in Africa. They are conscious of the important residual strength of conservative and anti-Soviet African forces, particularly in Egypt, Sudan, and the Francophone states. They probably realize the misgivings with which a number of African leaders such as Nyerere have begun to regard the continuing Cuban-Soviet military presence in Angola and Ethiopia. They are aware of their ongoing economic weaknesses in competing with the West in Africa. They are concerned lest factors such as these might some day produce a decision harmful to Soviet interests, such as agreement by the Front Line presidents to a Zimbabwe settlement which did not provide a sufficiently important role to Nkomo. They are also aware of the volatility and potential vulnerability of their positions in the African states where they have achieved their greatest success, as attested by the strong insurgent challenge which continues in Neto's Angola. Finally, they know that in Ethiopia itself, Eritrea is likely to prove a more difficult military problem than was the Ogaden, and that heavy Soviet-Cuban military involvement there could occasion more serious political costs.

11. Despite these difficulties, however, there is every evidence that the Soviets intend to continue to pursue what they regard as new avenues of opportunity in Africa, and that they will not be deterred by any adverse effects upon the detente relationship with the US or other Western powers. They are evidently convinced that Africa will remain their most fertile available field for an assertive foreign policy.